

Akaky's "Awakening" in *The Overcoat* by Nicolai Gogol.

Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin is presented very much as an anti-hero in the beginning paragraphs of "The Overcoat." According to the author, he was unlucky enough to be born late in March (close to Gogol's own name day) on a day when no saints' names were appealing to his mother, so that, as if by default, he takes his father's Christian name. The christening itself was less than propitious: the young child cried and made a sour expression as if, according to Gogol, he had the premonition that he would become a ninth class clerk (Gogol 923). Perhaps he also had a premonition of how his life would end. What we will see, as the story progresses, is that Akaky's "awakening," catalyzed by the new coat, is really his "undoing."

By the time we meet Akaky as an adult, he is already aging, with thin hair, pock marked skin and a complexion that Gogol describes as "hemorrhoidal." He appears to have nothing going for him professionally either as a ninth class clerk whose ambitions do not extend beyond the copying that he is given to do. Yet in spite of his lowly status, being also the usual butt of office jokes and pranks by the younger workers, there is one point about Akaky that should not be overlooked: he is content. "He worked with love," (On slewzheel s lyubov'yu) according to Gogol, having his favorite characters within the alphabet. At night he would eat his simple meal and recopy some of his favorite documents from the day; indeed, if he had been rewarded according to his zeal, he would have been promoted by several grades (Gogol 924).

The complication for Akaky's story occurs when, ascertaining some weak spots in his great coat, he applies to his local tailor, "Petrovich" (his name had been Grigorii as a serf) who insists that Akaky's garment cannot be repaired. Some critics have viewed Petrovich as the devil because of suggestive physical details such as his one deformed toenail, his being all but blind in one eye, and his having a snuff box with a faceless portrait.¹ Petrovich is also called a devil ("chort") by his wife (926). He does indeed function as the serpent in Akaky's garden because the exigency of paying for a new overcoat changes Akaky in a way that is not altogether good. It is also important to remember that Akaky is

¹ Dmitri Chizhevsky, "About Gogol's 'Overcoat,'" *Gogol From the Twentieth Century*, 319-20.

initially quite persistent in his efforts to have Petrovich change his mind and repair the old coat. He even goes back to the tailor's flat a second time, hoping to find him "in his cups" (*pod kurashom*) and in a more amenable frame of mind. Petrovich, however, is firm: Akaky would have to find a way to finance a new coat.

This challenge for Akaky is a source a stress and consternation to which he first responds with near panic. However, over time, as he acclimates to the notion of saving up for a new coat, he changes. With almost religious dedication and punctiliousness, Akaky rations his food and drink, even giving up candle light by which to read, in order to save up for the new coat. The idea of the "coat to be" (*budushchye sheenyele*) becomes the focus of his daily life, and Gogol compares it to a spouse and companion on his life's journey (*kak budto on zhenitsa*) (929). Nor is the immediate impact of the new coat itself any less satisfying: Akaky makes plans to socialize that evening, possibly for the first time ever. He begins to feel and act more like a normal man and even chuckles at a slightly risqué add in a store window. Shortly after the party, he all but pursues an attractive woman in the street. But this state of awakening would not last long.

The unfortunate attack on Akaky as he walks home from the evening soiree when a band of thieves assault him and snatch his new overcoat, is life-altering. This meek little man who rarely spoke on behalf of himself, hollered frantically (*otchayannee . . . krichat*) across the deserted square. When his landlady, appalled at his state upon arriving home, recommends that he go straight to the Police Commissioner and bypass the local police inspector, he does just that. Although put off by the delaying tactics of the Police Commissioner, Akaky, on better advice, goes the next day to the office of "an important personage," (*znachitelnyoe litso*). Our hero actually persists and stands up for himself more than could have been predicted. Still, the dramatic rebuke he receives from the newly important official vanquishes him, and ultimately, he arrives at home in an almost unconscious state, only to die shortly after (937).

Gogol's attack on officialdom and his tragic emphasis on Akaky's fate-- "Petersburg went on without him exactly as if he had never existed" (*kak budto . . . evo nikogda ne bylo*) (938) --do not preclude the fact that Akaky was wrong to put all of his hopes on a material item: the overcoat.

He allowed the new overcoat to be the cause of his awakening or “rebirth” so to speak, and when it is taken from him, he becomes spiritually bankrupt and dies after fruitless efforts to obtain justice for the coat. It is not unlikely that Gogol, an observant Christian himself, had the following passage from Matthew in mind: “If any man will sue thee at the law and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also” (5:40),² and shortly after in 6:19-20: “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth

and decay destroy, nor thieves break in and steal.”³ Thus Akaky’s suffering is a direct result of mistaken values, though it is no less real and devastating to him.

Akaky’s spectral appearances in Petersburg after death, as amusing and artistically satisfying as they may be, are really irrelevant to the larger message: Akaky mistook the vehicle for the reality of spiritual rebirth. Rather than end this way, it would have been better to have Petrovich repair the old dressing gown so that Akaky could focus again on his simple pleasures in life: his cabbage soup, even with the flies and “whatever else God happened to send along, (*chto ni poslal Bog*. . .)(925)” and his copying. To this extent Petrovich is the antagonist in the play and, inadvertently or not, the source of Akaky’s undoing.

² A translation of the passage in modern Russian is as follows: “и кто захочет судиться с тобою и взять у тебя рубашку, отдай ему и верхнюю одежду,” <http://www.wco.ru/biblio/books/newtest/main.htm>. The word “overcoat” is not specifically used in this translation but is implied in the phrase “верхнюю одежду” signifying what we would call “outerwear.” Gogol of course used a Nineteenth Century translation of the passage.

³ NEW AMERICAN BIBLE, 1987

Works Cited

Chishevsky, Dmitri. "About 'The Overcoat.'" *Gogol From the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*. Trans.

Robert A. MacGuire. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974. 295-322.

Forsythe. "Lecture 2: Gogol's Overcoat." April 16, 2012.

http://individual.utoronto.ca/h_forsythe/213_gogol.html

Gogol, Nicolai. "Shineyl," Russian Language Publishers. Moscow, 1975.

Gogol, Nicolai. "The Overcoat." Trans. Andrew MacAndrew. *Prentice Hall Literature: World Masterpieces*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2003. 924-940. Primary source citations in English are to this text.